

Introduction

My desire is to speak faith into the lives of others, encouraging them when they are discouraged, calling forth the seeds of greatness God planted within, assuring them that their best days are ahead. This book is filled with hopeful messages intended to do just that. My prayer is to inspire you and to expand your vision so you might find the courage to overcome any obstacles and accomplish your dreams. God has great things in store for you. A new season is coming. I hope my words ignite your faith and increase God's favor in your life.

Psalm 84:11 says no good thing will God withhold to those who walk uprightly. When you have a heart to please God and when you live a life of excellence and integrity -- being your best each day, living with purpose and passion and a desire to help others -- God's promise is that He will not withhold what you need to become you or what He has created you to be.

God will not withhold wisdom, creativity, good breaks, the right connections, strength, joy, or victory.

You may have been through challenging times. The economic downturn has affected people of all ages and incomes. Millions have lost their jobs. Millions more have seen their savings depleted. Many have lost their homes. Relationships have been strained. We've all been tested.

History has shown that economic depressions and recessions surely do cause suffering, but they also serve as catalysts for inspiration, creativity, and new levels of achievement that ultimately make for better lives and a better world. Many of the world's strongest corporations and family businesses were forged in times such as these. Some doors have closed, but others will open.

To give you strength and to fortify your faith, I've put this book together in five parts. Each is designed to build on the other. The goal is not simply to inspire and motivate you, but also to help you see that God's plan is at work in your life. He walks with you. You may not perceive a way out right now, but He does. You may not feel that you have all that it will take to emerge stronger, but He does. With God in your heart, you will persevere and prevail.

The book begins with a section entitled "It's Time to Believe," because tough times require strong faith, because this too will pass, because big problems precede bigger things to come, because every disappointment gives us fresh opportunities, and because each season of scarcity gives way to new seasons of increase.

It's time to reaffirm your belief that you are one of our Father's children. You are made in His image and He loves you.

"It's Time for Favor" is the section about faith fortification. Here you can bulk up with encouragement to pray bold prayers, to seek thriving over surviving, to choose faith over fear, to expect favor in your future, and to speak faith-filled words.

In "It's Time for Restoration," I offer you the tools of forgiveness and renewal. These tools include God's ability to turn back time, your power to come back from setbacks and to bounce back from disappointments. Restoration comes too from living a resurrected life and from holding on to your promise of a better day.

"It's Time to Trust" builds your resolve by reminding you of those things you can trust: that all things work together for good, that God remembers you, that you can gain strength through adversity, and that there will come an anointing of ease.

Finally, I've concluded the book with "It's Time to Stretch." We stretch to grow. We stretch to build strength. We stretch to reach beyond previous levels of accomplishment and fulfillment. The final chapters will motivate you to step into your divine destiny, to stay open for something new, to find your place of blessing, and to believe for a supernatural year.

As you read these chapters, keep your heart pure, strive for excellence, and prepare yourself, because it's your time for God's goodness, favor, and restoration. It's your time to walk in the fullness of His blessing.

-- Joel Osteen

Chapter 1

You're Closer Than You Think!

While on vacation in Colorado, I woke up early for a hike. The three-mile trail ran to the peak of Beaver Creek Mountain. At the base a sign said it should take about three hours to reach the top.

Looking up to my destination, I was intimidated. The trail was extremely steep. The altitude at the base was 8,000 feet above sea level. The peak stood at more than 11,000 feet.

Just walking up the first set of stairs, I began breathing heavier than normal. I had to remind myself to take it easy. At home in Houston, I run several miles a few times a week and play a lot of basketball. But the elevation there is only fifty feet above sea level. The thinner air in the Colorado mountains had me doubting whether I could make it to the top.

I started out with just my cell phone and a bottle of water. Determined, I set a pretty good pace. The first fifteen minutes seemed fairly easy. The next fifteen minutes were increasingly difficult. I felt as though I were carrying an extra load. I had to stop every so often to catch my breath.

About forty-five minutes into my hike, the trail got extremely steep -- almost like I was climbing straight up. My pathway snaked skyward through thick stands of aspen and ponderosa pine. The view was both beautiful and daunting. Despite the fact I am in shape from running and playing basketball, my legs were burning and my chest was pounding.

As I climbed over a big ridge, I had to stop for air. Sweat was pouring off my body. I thought: *If there's another two hours like this, I don't know if I can make it.*

Up to that point, I had not seen anyone else on the path. Suddenly an older gentleman heading down the mountain came around a curve. He wore a T-shirt, shorts, and hiking shoes and carried a walking stick. He seemed cool and calm. And he read me pretty well.

As we passed, he said something that changed my whole perspective. He smiled kindly and said in a calm voice: "You are closer than you think."

Hearing those words, I felt rejuvenated, as if he'd breathed new life into my lungs. Energy surged through my body. My legs grew stronger. I caught a second wind. From that point forward, with every stride, I repeated those words of encouragement: "I will make it. I'm closer than I think."

Though the climb was difficult, though my muscles and lungs were burning, I kept saying, "I'm almost to the top. I know I can make it." And sure enough, just ten minutes later, I clambered over these big boulders and beheld a beautiful sight: the summit.

According to the sign at the base, it was supposed to be a three-hour hike. But I'd made it in just under an hour! I was much closer than I'd thought when I passed that gentleman on the trail. Yet, without his encouraging words, I might have turned around. I might have talked myself out of continuing because I thought I had two more hours to go.

Until I met the older hiker, my perspective was limited and so was my thinking. I knew only what I'd read on the sign. He knew I was just ten minutes from my goal, and when he told me I was closer, he gave me a fresh perspective. He knew more about the trail ahead of me, just as God knows more about what lies ahead for you.

I don't know where you are headed, what your dreams are, or how many obstacles you have to overcome. But I encourage you to let these words reach deep down into your spirit. Receive them by faith.

You are closer than you think.

A global recession has forced many to postpone their dreams and cancel their plans. You may have lost your job. You may have lost your savings, maybe even your home. It could be that you have health concerns or relationship problems. Maybe you are frustrated because it's taking so long to get where you want to be in your life. Yet now is not the time to talk yourself out of your goals and dreams. Now is not the time to get discouraged. You may think, as I did climbing that trail, that you're not even halfway there. You may feel you have so far to go. But the truth is, you don't know. Your dream may just be up around the corner. You may think it will take another two years. But if you stay in faith, who knows? It may just be two more months. You are closer than you think. I believe it's your time.

Amber Corson was a stay-at-home mom with three young children. When her husband was laid off from his Florida construction job as the economy soured, Amber had to take a night-shift job to help support the family.

She'd been working that late shift for four weeks. One night she was driving home, tired, scared, missing her kids, and worried about their future. Amber felt like God had bigger plans for her family than to struggle. She prayed on that drive home. "God, please tell me what I can do to get my family through this."

She said His response came to her "like a breath."

"I gave you a gift. Go plant gardens. Do your heart's work."

Amber had a degree in horticulture that she'd never used. She was so talented she'd been certified as a master gardener. She had a natural talent for making things grow. That night, she told her husband what God had put in her heart. She prayed on it. In the next few weeks, she said, things "just fell into place like it had been planned for me all along."

She called her landscaping business Eden Paradise Gardens. It grew quickly and flourished beyond anything she had dreamed. It was her time!

God wants to breathe new life into your dreams. He wants to breathe new hope into your heart. You may be about to give up on a marriage, on a troubled child, on a lifelong goal. But God wants you to hold on. He says that if you'll get your second wind, if you'll put on a new attitude and press forward like you're headed down the final stretch, you'll see Him begin to do amazing things.

Tune out the negative messages. Quit telling yourself: *I'm never landing back on my feet financially. I'm never breaking this addiction. I'm never landing a better job.*

Instead, your declarations should be: *I am closer than I think. I can raise this child. I can overcome this sickness. I can make this business work. I know I can find a new job.*

Psalm 30:5 says that weeping may endure for a night, but I know joy is coming in the morning. You must get up each day knowing this could be the day you get the break you need. This could be the day you see your health turn around. This could be the day your child comes back home. This could be the day you meet the man or woman of your dreams.

Zechariah 9:12 says that we should be prisoners of hope. It's easy to give up. It's easy to get discouraged. But God wants us to be so full of hope, so full of expectancy, that we just can't help believing for the best.

When you're a prisoner of something, it's like you're chained to it. You can't get away from it. I know people who are prisoners of fear, prisoners of worry, prisoners of doubt. You've heard them. "Nothing good ever happens to me." "It's never changing, Joel. It's just been too long."

They are chained to despair and discouragement. Break those chains. Become a prisoner of hope. No matter how long it takes, no matter how impossible it looks, your attitude should be: "I just can't help it. I know it will work out. I know I will overcome. It may be taking a long time, but I know this too shall pass. It may be difficult, but I know that means I'm close to my victory."

Today is the day!

Down in the Florida Keys, there was a treasure hunter whose motto was "Today's the day." Every day for sixteen years, Mel Fisher sent his divers out with those encouraging words to find a Spanish ship that sank off the Keys in 1622. He often had to pay his men in promises while dodging bill collectors. He and his family lived on a leaky houseboat for years. One of his sons and a daughter-in-law were lost at sea as they searched for the treasure.

Still, Fisher never gave up. He refused to abandon his dream or to give in to critics and doubters. He held on by declaring that each day would be *the* day. Then, in 1985, Mel's divers found the "mother lode" of gold and silver and jewelry from the wreckage of the Spanish galleon. Nearly thirty years later, divers were still bringing up treasure from that site.

Is today the day for you to accomplish your goal, to land your dream job, to find love, to restore your health? You are closer than you think to a better life, a richer relationship, a healthier body.

Rewards await you if you stay steadfast in your faith.

Don't let doubters ruin your optimistic spirit. If somebody says to you, "What is it with you? What makes you think everything will work out? Do you really believe you will always succeed?"

Just tell the doubters: "I don't think it will happen. I know it will happen! I'm a prisoner of hope. I can't get away from it. I just can't make myself get negative. I just can't make myself complain. Hope feeds my faith and lifts my spirits."

The doubters may say, "Well, I don't know why. I saw the medical report. It doesn't look good for you."

"Yes, but I have another report," you can tell them. "It says God is restoring health back unto me."

"Well, I saw your child. I don't think he'll ever do what's right."

"Really? I have another report. It says as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

You may not see any of this in the natural. It may not look like it will come to pass. But that's okay. The Scripture says, "We walk by faith and not by sight." That means we don't have to see it to believe it. It's just the opposite. If we believe it, *then* we see it.

Take your dreams and the promises God has put in your heart and every day declare that they will come to pass. Just say something like, "Father, I want to thank You that my payday is coming. You said no good thing will You withhold, because I walk uprightly. And I believe even right now You are arranging things in my favor."

Are you a prisoner of fear? Worry? Self-pity? Negativity?

Break those chains and become a prisoner of hope. Expect God's favor. Believe that He is working in your life, even right now.

God has put dreams and desires in your heart.

We all have goals we want to accomplish and situations we believe we will turn around. But often when it's taking a long time and things are not working out, it's easy to lose our enthusiasm. That's when the negative thoughts come, saying:

It never will change.

You never will get well.

You never will climb out of debt.

That child never will straighten up.

If you listen to those negative thoughts, you will likely become discouraged and give up on your dreams. Many times we miss out on God's best because we give up too soon. We don't realize how close we are to victory.

Hold on to your faith. Another few days of believing, another few weeks of doing the right thing, or another few months of staying in faith and you will see that promise come to pass.

Right now, you are so close to seeing that situation turn around. That answer you've been praying about is just right around the corner. You can't afford to get discouraged. You can't afford to give up now.

That's what the scripture says in Hebrews 10:35. It tells us not to cast away our confidence, for it will be richly rewarded. That's saying if we will stay in faith, if we will keep believing, keep hoping, keep doing the right thing, God promises there will be a reward.

One translation says, in effect, "Don't get discouraged. Payday is coming."

When you're tempted to get down and things are not going your way, you need to keep telling yourself, "This may be hard. It may be taking a long time. But I know God is a faithful God. And I will believe, knowing that my payday is on its way."

Whenever life grows difficult and the pressure is turned up, that's a sign that your time is near. When lies bombard your mind, when you are most tempted to get discouraged, and when you feel like throwing in the towel -- that's not the time to give up. That's not the time to back down. That's the time to dig in your heels. Put on a new attitude. You are closer than you think.

You may have had a lot of things come against you. I know sometimes it seems like the more you pray, the worse it gets. You do the right thing but get the wrong results. Maybe you're treating somebody kindly and respectfully, but they're being unkind and discourteous to you. The easy thing would be to say, "Forget it. I don't have to put up with this." "This marriage never will work." "I'll never be able to raise this child." "I don't like this job."

Instead of getting discouraged, instead of going around all sour, you need to have the attitude to say, "I've come too far to stop now. I've been through too much to back down. I realize the pressure has been turned up because I'm about to give birth to my dreams!"

A couple I know told me their son was on the wrong path, running with the wrong crowd. He had addictions he needed to overcome. They were doing everything they could to help him. They found him a new place to live away from his drug-using friends. They found a support group for him. They were praying more than ever. But they said, "Joel, it seems like the more we pray, the more we try, the more we believe, the worse he gets."

They were so concerned. But I told them what I'm telling you. The reason the pressure has been turned up is because you're close to your victory. The enemy would not be fighting so hard if he didn't know he was about to lose his grip on this child.

If you will keep believing, keep hoping, keep doing the right thing, and if you stay strong for that final push, you will see the situation turn around. You'll see that promise come to pass.

It's just like a woman having a baby. The first month or two is not that difficult. No big deal. The mother-to-be looks and feels much the same. But then in a few months she gains the baby's weight. She carries around the extra pounds. Her feet may swell up. Her back may hurt. She may have some nausea, some morning sickness.

By the eighth or the ninth month, husbands, you know you'd better give that woman some space. Don't mess with Momma. Don't backtalk her. Just do what she says and nobody will get hurt. She gets more and more uncomfortable. But then when her water breaks and she goes into labor, all those other challenges seem insignificant compared to the difficulty of giving birth.

When Victoria was in labor with our first child, our son Jonathan, she was holding on to my arm so tight. When she had a contraction, she squeezed my arm. Victoria would scream, and then I would scream.

I wanted to mention to her that she was hurting me, but I feared for my life!

Truth be told, if a woman in labor had a choice, she'd probably say, "I don't want to do this anymore. It's too difficult. I can't stand it."

But she doesn't have a choice. The doctor, the nurse, the husband keep saying, "Push! Push! Push!" Before long, she pushes that baby out. And in a few minutes she forgets all about the pain because she's holding the promise. She's holding that little child.

It's the same principle in dealing with daily life. The greatest difficulty always comes right before the birth of a dream. Before you see a new level of God's favor, don't be surprised if things come against you to try to discourage you. People may try to talk you out of your dreams, to convince you to just settle where you are.

You may not realize that you are "in labor" right now. You are about to give birth to what God has put in your heart. That's why it's such a struggle. You're in that final push. Maybe at work you're doing the right thing, going the extra mile, but you were passed over for a promotion. It wasn't fair. What was that disappointment? A labor pain. So just push through it.

Maybe you wanted to create that new business, but your partner backed out. The financing didn't come through. What was that disappointment? Another labor pain. If you'll keep pushing, keep believing, keep hoping, before long -- like that woman in labor -- you will push that promise out.

You may feel as though you've never had such a struggle in your finances, your health, or your relationships. You could say, "Joel, this is the greatest attack that I've ever faced."

Instead of getting down and thinking, *Poor old me*, learn to turn it around and say, "Yes, this is the greatest attack that I've ever been through, but I know it means that I'm headed for the greatest victory that I've ever seen." Remember, it's always darkest right before the dawn.

You're about to give birth to that promise.

I read about an experiment that attempted to measure the power of attitude in rats. The researchers wanted to see how the rats' attitudes affected their will to live. They put one rat in a large tub of water with high sides so it could not get out. Then they put the tub in a dark room. They timed how long the rat would keep swimming before it gave up. The rat lasted a little over three minutes.

Then the researchers put another rat in the same tub, but this time they allowed a bright ray of light to shine into the room. That rat swam more than thirty-six hours, seven hundred times longer than the rat with no light.

Why was that? The rat with no light had no hope. When he looked ahead he saw only darkness. There wasn't any reason to keep swimming. That's what happens when we don't expect God's favor. We lose faith that we can overcome our obstacles. We don't believe that God is in control, so we lose our passion, we lose our enthusiasm.

That's why it's so important -- especially in times of difficulty -- to keep reminding yourself: "The Creator of the universe is directing my steps. He has me in the palm of His hands. And even though this is difficult, I know it's just a matter of time before it turns around. I know my payday is coming."

You may be about to give up on a dream. You think it's been too long. It never will change. It will never work out. But you must get your fire back. Fan that flame. Keep that dream alive. Even though it's taking a long time, the good news is, God still has a way to bring it to pass.

Victoria once lost a ring her mother had given her. It was a diamond band that had been in the family for several generations. Although it was valuable, it held even more sentimental value to us. Sometimes when we'd go on trips Victoria hid the ring in our house. We thought maybe she'd hidden it and forgotten the hiding place. So we looked and looked and looked in every drawer, in every cabinet. I looked behind couches and between cushions. I found things that I hadn't seen in ten years. But never Victoria's ring.

After a couple of months of looking on and off, I finally gave up. That ring was nowhere to be found. But every few days I heard Victoria pray: "Father, thank you that I will find my ring. Thank you, for You are leading me and guiding me."

I didn't say anything out loud, but inside, being the great man of faith that I am, I thought, *Victoria, you are wasting your time. We have turned this house upside down. That ring is just not here.*

It's funny, but when my mother-in-law noticed that Victoria was not wearing the ring and asked her about it, Victoria said, "Oh, Mom. I've put it away in a really safe place."

I thought, *Yeah, so safe that we can't even find it.*

As the months went by, I probably heard Victoria say she would find that ring five hundred times. I never once heard her give up and say, "It's gone. I've lost it. What will I do?"

She had an optimistic attitude, "I'm closer than I think. I know any day that ring will show up."

Three years later we were driving home from Victoria, Texas, two hours south of Houston. We had just ministered for my brother-in-law Jim and my sister Tamara. Driving on the freeway, 11:00 at night, Victoria said, "Joel, you'd better slow down. You will get a ticket."

"I won't get a ticket," I said. "We're only going 70. The speed limit is 65."

"No, the speed limit is 60 at night," Victoria said.

"No, it's 65."

"Joel, I'm telling you, you need to slow down."

I laughed. "Victoria, I have the favor of God."

God has such a sense of humor. Just about that time, I looked in my rearview mirror and saw the flashing lights. Then I looked at Victoria and said, "You made me get this ticket."

The officer was a real nice, polite young man. He said, "I need to see your driver's license." I gave it to him.

"Are you the minister?" he asked.

"I am."

"Did you speak at Faith Family Church tonight?"

"I did. In fact, that's my sister's church."

"I know," the officer said. "My father was there. He's the head usher."

"Oh, man. That's great. He was so nice to me."

The officer laughed, but he still asked for my insurance card.

And so Victoria dug deeper and deeper in the glove compartment. It was dark and we were a little uptight about being pulled over. She found every card except the right one.

Finally, with the officer waiting, Victoria took all the contents out of the glove compartment in search of the insurance card. She reached way back inside as far as she could. There, deep down in the darkness, she felt something with a hard, sharp edge. She dug a little deeper, grabbed it, and pulled it out.

Lo and behold, it was her missing ring. She was so excited. She forgot all about looking for the insurance card!

I thought: *Girl, you're rejoicing, and I'm about to go to jail.*

"Victoria, that's great. But we still have to find the insurance card," I reminded her.

She finally dug out that, too, and gave it to the officer.

"Joel, I'll let you go," he said. "But first, I have one request. When I come visit your church, will you save me a seat?"

"Officer," I told him, "I'll save you a whole section."

I drove off that night thinking: *God, You are so good. I didn't get a ticket and Victoria found her ring.*

God works in mysterious ways. I thought later that He caused Victoria to find her ring at my expense. But the truth is, Victoria stayed in faith. She had that attitude, "I'm closer than I think."

A young couple from our church told me about the challenges they had while trying to sell their house. They had only a few prospects in the first few weeks. They weren't having much luck.

The market was tough. Realtors told them it may take six months, a year, maybe even two years to sell. But this couple had an attitude of faith. They were prisoners of hope. And even though it didn't look good, they kept reminding themselves, "We are closer than we think. It could happen any day."

This one couple came back to look at the house a second time. They wanted to spend a couple of hours really studying it to see if it was right for their family. The owners were okay with that. But they debated whether they should take down their personal pictures of themselves and their children, just so they could remain more private. After they thought about it, they felt good about leaving those pictures where they were.

The potential buyers came to look at the house, and the owners left so they could take their time. A few hours later, they received a call from the real estate agent saying the couple definitely wanted to purchase the house. The buyers told my friends that they'd been torn between their house and another one. But during that last visit, they'd seen something that convinced them to buy my friends' house.

"We saw a picture of you and your pastor, and we thought: 'These people love God. They go to Lakewood. This must be the house for us!'"

My friend told me: "Joel, you helped me sell my house."

I told him that was great: "Now let's talk about my commission."

Know that God has all kinds of ways to bring your dreams to pass.

He can cause a simple photograph to be in the right place at the right time to help you. He can cause a police officer to pull you over in the middle of the night and help you find something you've been looking for.

God is in complete control. So be a prisoner of hope. Get up each day expecting His favor.

When negative thoughts come and your burden seems so heavy you feel discouraged, just keep telling yourself: "I'm closer than I think. Right now the Creator of the universe is lining up things in my favor: the right people, the right breaks, the right opportunities."

Maybe you have been through tough times. Resolve to move forward. Don't stay there. Put on a new attitude. Disappointments come and go, but God's favor is for a lifetime.

A friend told me a story about an executive who had an interesting print hanging in his office. It depicted a large rowboat stranded on a beach. Two oars rested gently in the sand, with the ocean at low tide twenty or thirty feet behind it. The boat looked too heavy to drag, too big to move. It was just stuck there in the sand.

The picture wasn't a thing of beauty. It wasn't inspiring. In fact, it was depressing. Here was this boat created for the water, a very nice boat made to dance on top of the ocean waves, stuck in the sand.

But at the very bottom of the picture was a small caption that gave meaning to the otherwise unremarkable picture. It read: "The tide always comes back."

With that simple caption, the print took on new meaning: When the tide returned, that stranded boat once again would find its purpose. It would return to the place it was meant to be.

My friend told me that the executive once had gone through a great disappointment. He didn't think he would ever be happy again. Then he saw the painting at a small antique store and bought it for just a few dollars. Every time he looked at it, he said to himself: "The tide is coming back."

That print spoke faith into his heart. The caption gave him hope that things would change in his favor.

You may find yourself in a similar situation. Stuck. Stranded. Robbed of your purpose. Things may not be going your way. You've lost your energy and enthusiasm.

Heed those words: "The tide is coming back."

Hear my message: God is breathing new life into your dreams.

You will feel the wind of His spirit lift your sails once again. You are not meant to simply endure life. Barely getting by is not acceptable. You were meant to dance on top of the waves.

Tell yourself each and every day: "The tide is coming back. Today is the day! I am closer than I think!"

Remember that it is always darkest before the dawn. More challenges mean you're closer to your victory. Don't give up on your dream. Don't give up your relationship because the waters get rough. Don't give up on living a healthy life because illness brings you down. Times may grow tough, but remember there are rewards for staying in faith.

God promises your payday is on its way. If you'll learn to be a prisoner of hope and get up every day expecting God's favor, you'll see God do amazing things. You'll overcome every obstacle. You'll defeat every enemy. And I believe and declare you'll see every dream, every promise God has put in your heart, come to pass.

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